

## **Meditations on the Frame**

*by José Ortega y Gasset*

### **In Search of a Theme**

There are very few things in this room where I now write; among them, however, are two large photographs and a small painting, which, in times of forced leisure, sickness, or fatigue, are favorites in attracting my attention. The two photographs face each other from opposite Walls. One is a reproduction of the figure of the Mona Lisa, which hangs in the Prado Museum [sic] ; the other is of the Man with his Hand on his Breast, painted by that frenzied Greek from Toledo. This unknown character is a glowing, passionate physiognomy, who restrains an incurable and friendly exaltation by the weight of his hand and looks out at the world with feverish eyes. A starlike phosphorescence emanates from his white collar ruff. His pointed beard seems to tremble, and against his black suit the golden hilt of his sword throbs like a perpetual flame beneath his heart. I have always thought that this figure was the most consummate representation of Don Juan; that is, of Don Juan according to my Way of interpreting him, which differs a bit from the standard ways. As for the Mona Lisa, with her plucked eyebrows and elastic, molluscan flesh, with her double-edged smile (which is at the same time one of enticement and disdain), for me she symbolizes extreme femininity. Just as Don Juan is the man who, to women, is purely a Man - not father nor husband, nor brother nor son - the Mona Lisa is the quintessential Woman, whose charms remain unconquered. Mother and wife, sister and daughter: these are the by-products of femininity, the forms that woman dons when she stops being, or is not yet, Woman. The majority of women are fully Woman for only one hour of their lives, and men tend to be Don Juan for no more than a

few moments. If we stretch these moments out, prolonging them so that they last throughout all existence, we will create the ideal figure of Don Juan and Dona Juana. Because that is what the Mona Lisa is: Dofia Juana. Thus, these two photographs, from their opposite walls, are two of a kind. Victorious over all other women, it was interesting to make Don Juan undergo this greatest of experiments by subjecting him to the powers of Dona Juana. What will happen? The room in which I am writing is the psychology lab where the experiment will be conducted. When evening falls throughout and the light's rearguard fights the invading darkness in the corners of this abode, a dynamic exchange of energy will burst forth between both photographs. More than once I have had the pleasure of coming upon this tacit dialogue between the two symbolic cartoons, this offense and defense which they launch like fireworks and send shooting throughout these rooms like great Roman candles.

Since I must still write one more folio\* in order to fill out all the dimensions of this volume, why not write it on this subject? There is, however, one difficulty. Such a serious subject as love and pain will not fit in just one folio; it requires dozens of them, and at this time the task is to write just one.

Let us search for a humbler theme. Perhaps that little painting that hangs to the left of the Man with his Hand on his Breast. It is a landscape by Regoyos, that humblest of painters, the Holy Father of dirt clods and forest groves, who, it seems, would get down on his knees in order to paint a cabbage. The painting depicts a corner of the Bidasoa river region: a serene plot of vegetable gardens, the lead-colored mountains of France showing vaguely in the background, weightless clouds drifting on high, the sinuous curves of the river, a shimmering

*'F In Ortega y Gasset's time, it was customary to write in folio form, that is, on sheets of*

*paper of a specific dimension which would then be folded over into quartos or octavos and considered as a completed work or as a section of a book-TRANS*

town gilded by the last rays of the sun, and the international bridge over which hurries a little train, the only spot of nervousness in the midst of the vaporous calm. The smoke from the locomotive vanishes into the air, and just when it's about to disappear altogether, we see it reborn of itself; and so it goes on, indefinitely. This continuous rhythm of the death and resurrection of the little wisp of smoke endows the painting with a sort of vital pulse that keeps it forever in an unfading present tense.

Couldn't one fill a folio with all that this insignificant painting suggests?

Unfortunately, no. Nothing would be easier than to write several folios about this painting ; but to write one, only one — impossible. The reader doesn't suspect the difficulties that one must go through in order to write just one folio. And everything in the world possesses this same marvelous quality! There is so much to say about even the most trifling of them! And it is so painful to arbitrarily amputate the limbs from a subject and then offer the reader only its stump-covered torso!

Let us search, then, for an even humbler theme than the humble painting by the humble painter. For example: its gilded frame. Let us meditate briefly on the frame. Even with our subject matter thus limited, we shall certainly be unable to do more than barely touch upon it.

### **Frame, Clothing, and Adornment**

Pictures live housed within their frames. That association of picture and frame is not an accidental one. Each has need of the other. A picture without a frame has the air about it of a naked, despoiled man. Its contents seem to spill out over

the four sides of the canvas and dissolve into the atmosphere. By the same token, the frame constantly demands a picture with which to fill its interior, and does so to such an extent that, in the absence of one, the frame will tend to convert whatever happens to be visible within it into a picture.

The relationship between the one and the other, then, is essential and not accidental. It is of the nature of a physiological requirement, just as the nervous system requires the circulatory one and vice versa, just as the torso aspires to culminate in the head, and the head to perch atop a torso.

The partnership between frame and picture is not, however, the same type as the one between clothing and the body (the first partnership to come to mind when searching for comparisons). The frame is not the picture's clothing, because clothing covers up the body, whereas the frame, on the contrary, shows the painting off. It is true that clothes often reveal part of the body, but to us this always seems a slight bit of madness committed by the outfit, a breach of duty, a sin. The amount of body surface that the clothing reveals is always proportionate to the amount that it conceals, so that when the first quantity is greater than the second, clothing stops being clothing and becomes decoration. Thus, the belt worn by a naked savage is of ornamental character, rather than being an article of dress.

But neither is the frame an ornament. The very first artistic act executed by man was one of adornment and, above all, the adornment of his own body. In adornment, that primordial art, we find the seeds of all subsequent art. And that first artistic act simply consisted of the union of two works of nature that nature itself had not united. Man placed a feather upon his head, or strung together tigers' teeth to hang about his neck, or clasped a bracelet of colorful stones

around his wrist; and behold, the first babblings of that complex and divine discourse on art.

What mysterious instinct induced the Indian to affix a magnificent, showy feather to his head? Undoubtedly, it was the instinct to draw attention to oneself and signaling one's difference from, and superiority over, others. Biology shows us that this instinct for superiority and self-betterment runs even deeper than the one for self-preservation.

That inspired Indian felt in his heart a hazy notion that somehow he was worth more than the rest, that he was more of a man than the others, that his whistling arrow was the truest in all the impenetrable forest, as it went rushing madly toward its target underneath the wing of the bird with the precious feathers. This consciousness of superiority languished mutely inside of him. But when he placed the feather upon his head, the Indian thus created an external expression of that private notion he held about himself.

Was that feather on his head merely there so that others would look at it? No; the showy feather functioned more like a lightning rod, attracting the looks of others and conducting them downwards so that they would focus on himself.

The feather was an accent mark, and an accent mark does not modify itself but, rather, the letter beneath it. The feather served to accent and glorify the Indian's head and body, shooting from him like a cry of color launched at the four winds.

All decoration preserves this same meaning, which is evident in the telltale downward-slanting strokes of the feather on a savage's forehead. It calls attention to itself, yes, but in the spirit of channeling that attention downwards onto the person whom it adorns. Similarly, the frame does not call attention to itself. Proof of that is simple. If each of you were to reflect upon the paintings you know

best, you would find that you cannot recall the frames in which they are set. We are not used to seeing a frame except when it is in the carpenter's shop, bereft of a painting, that is, when the frame is not fulfilling its function, when it's, so to speak, out of a job.

### **The Island of Art**

Instead of attracting attention to itself, the frame limits itself to concentrating attention and making it spill out onto the picture. But that is not its principal skill.

The wall upon which the Regoyos painting hangs does not measure more than 18 feet. The painting takes up only a minimal part of that space and, nevertheless, is able to present me with an ample segment of the Bidasoa region: a river and a bridge, a train, a town, and the curved ridge of a large mountain. How can all of that fit in such a meager space? Obviously, it is there without being there. The painted scenery does not cause me to react to it in the same way that I would react to its real-life counterpart. The bridge isn't really a bridge, nor is the smoke smoke, nor the countryside countryside. Everything in it enjoys a merely apparent existence. The painting, like poetry or music, like all works of art, is an aperture of unreality that opens magically unto us in our real world.

When I look at my grey, domestic walls, my attitude is inevitably one of vital utilitarianism. When I look at the painting, I enter an imaginary space and adopt an attitude of pure contemplation. Wall and painting, then, are two antagonistic and uncommunicative worlds. My spirit leaps from reality to unreality as if from wakefulness to dreams.

The work of art is an imaginary island that floats surrounded by reality on all sides. In order for it to be produced, it is necessary that the aesthetic body remain

isolated from the real world. We cannot, by merely walking one step at a time, pass from the ground upon which we tread to the ground that is painted. It takes more than that. The indecisive nature of the boundaries between the artistic and the living disturbs our sense of aesthetic pleasure. Hence the picture without a frame, confusedly blending the boundaries with the pragmatic, extra-artistic objects that surround it, loses all elegance and suggestion. What is needed is for that real wall to terminate quickly and abruptly, so that we may find ourselves suddenly and without hesitation in the unreal territory of the picture. An isolator is needed. And that isolator is the frame.

In order to isolate one thing from another, a third thing is needed which must neither be like the first nor the second - a neutral object. Now, the frame is not the wall, a merely utilitarian fragment of the real world; but neither is it quite the enchanted surface of the painting. As the frontier for both regions, the frame serves to neutralize a brief strip of wall. And acting as a trampoline, it sends our attention hurtling off to the legendary dimension of the aesthetic island.<sup>1</sup>

The frame, then, has something of the window about it, just as the window is a lot like the frame. The painted canvases are portholes of ideality which are perforated in the mute reality of the walls. They are openings of illusion into which we can peer, thanks to the beneficent "window," the frame. On the other hand, a corner of the city or countryside, seen through the square outlines of the window, seems to split off from reality and acquire a strange palpitation of the ideal. The same thing happens with the far-distant things that are trimmed away by the unequivocal curve of an arch?<sup>2</sup>

### **The Gilded Frame**

The gilded frame's triumph over all other types of frames (an undisputed fact

proven throughout the centuries) supports this manner of interpreting the frame's function. After all, if we intend to tear ourselves away from our everyday real-world dealings, nothing could be better than to come face to face with something completely devoid of all similarity with natural things (since these things, to a certain extent, always suggest practical problems). Now then, all shapes, no matter how stylized, retain some allusion to the real objects from which they have been distilled. The purest and most geometric ornament, the curve or scroll of Greek architecture, preserves the indestructible echo of some natural form, just as the ancient seashell, fished out of the ocean a thousand years ago, still reverberates with the sound of Atlantic undertows. Only that which is without shape is free from any allusion to reality.

The predominance of the gilded frame is due, perhaps, to the fact that metallic paint is the material that gives off the most reflections. A reflection is that note of color, of light, which contains no form in and of itself, but which is pure, shapeless color. We do not attribute the reflections of a metallic or glazed object to the object itself, as we do its surface color. The reflection is neither the reflecting object nor whatever may be reflected in it. Instead, it lies somewhere in between those things, a specter without substance. For this reason — because a reflection has neither its own form nor that of anything else - we are unable to arrange our perception of it, and we often end up rather dazzled and bewildered. Thus, the gilded frame, with its bristling halo of sharp-edged radiance, inserts a ribbon of pure splendor between the painting and the unreal world. Its reflections, acting like excited little daggers, incessantly cut the lines that we unwittingly string up between the unreal painting and the surrounding reality. For that same reason, at the entrance to Paradise one finds an angel brandishing a flaming



sword — that is, with a reflection in its fist.

### **The Front Stage Curtain**

The front curtain is the stage's frame. It stretches open its wide jaws like parentheses, ready to hold within it something different from whatever may already be present in the room. Because of that, the freer the curtain is of ornamentation, the better. With an enormous and absurd gesture, it warns us that in the imaginary hinterland of the empty stage behind it another world is beginning; the unreal, the phantasmagoric.

Let us not accept, then, that the curtains yawn open before us merely in order to speak of mundane affairs and repeat those same things which the audience already knows in its head and feels in its heart. Let us, instead, only accept their opening up in order to exude gusts of dreamlike fantasy and steamy breaths of legends.

### **Failure**

The attempt to write a folio about the frame fails, as had been foreseen. We must conclude when we have but begun. We should now go on to discuss the hat and veil as frames for the female face. But we will have to give up on that. And later on it would have been worthwhile to pose the suggestive question of why paintings in China and Japan are usually unframed. But how can one approach that subject, which implies as it does the radical differentiation between Far Eastern and Western art, between the Asian heart and the European one? In order to understand it, it would first be necessary to suggest why the Chinese orient themselves toward the south and not the north, as we do; why they dress in white in times of mourning, rather than in black; why they begin the construction of their houses with the roof and not with the foundation ; and finally, why,

when they Want to say “no, ” they nod their heads up and down, as we do when we want to say "yes."

***Translated from the Spanish by/Andrea L. Bell.***

Notes

*For the original text, see "Meditacion del Marco," in Obras de lose Ortega y Gasset, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1943], vol. 1, pp. 369-75.*

*1. Remember the etymology of isla ["island"], a word that comes from insula. The root sul, like sal, signifies the idea of leaping or jumping. Thus, in-sula means that bit of land, that*  
*/I*

*large rock which has jumped" into the middle of the sea.*

*2. Note the fact that this tinge of unreality grows as the distance between the arch or window and whatever scene is visible beyond it increases. Because of that, we do not perceive the intermediary planes, and the actual roads by which we might arrive at those scenes remain hidden to us.*